

Helon Habila: Narrating A Post-Colony with Its Dysfunctional Baggage

CHIJIJOKE UWASOMBA

Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, Nigeria.
cjsomba@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This essay attempts a critical reading of Helon Habila's two novels- *Waiting for an Angel* and *Measuring Time*. In these two novels, Habila narrates the history of Nigeria from the mists of antiquity through pre-colonial and colonial times to the post-colonial era. Habila, it should be noted, belongs to the third generation phase of Nigerian writing. The essay demonstrates that apparently because of the impact of the lived Nigerian history in its stark and crude realities on Habila, he creates a novelistic tradition with the revolutionary imperative as its *leit motif*. However, this revolutionary fervour is short-lived in the novels under consideration. The essay argues that the two novels represent a continuation of the creative struggle by Nigerian writers to formalise the search for Nigeria's nationhood and to demonstrate that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power. The paper urges Habila to sustain the revolutionary artistic narrative order which appears to be the *leit motif* of his narrative consciousness.

Keywords: Narration, Post-colony, Nigeria, Revolution, Poverty, Keti community.

The writer, irrespective of his or her ideological persuasion has a duty to discharge to the society and even to himself/herself. This is because the writer is saddled with the social responsibility to communicate certain social and personal experiences to his/her audience. We can argue from the outset that all literatures, whatever their proclaimed orientations, serve one form of public purpose or another. The Romantics, in spite of the private nature of their writings, could be said to be supremely public as their personal concerns affect the public domain. In a letter to his friend Wilkie Collins dated September 6, 1858, Charles Dickens, arguably the father of the English novel, writes of the importance of social commitment:

Everything that happens (...) shows beyond mistake that you can't shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it, that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain (1994:132)

Given the above, we can understand Chinua Achebe when he warns that "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant" (1975:78). The "big social and political issues" are the Shenanigans, the stupendous level of corruption in most African states, the politics of survival and its consequences on the state and society and the dizzying quotidian realities Africans are confronted with in their genuine struggles to survive. There is despair everywhere and responsible writers cannot but be counted in the search for the evolution of a society that is meaningful and well-governed.

Since independence, African states are marked by one form of self inflicted debility or another, manifested in social decay, immiserization of the people, planlessness, slummization, thieveries of all stripes and hues with dire consequences for development. The military worsened the situation in their well-choreographed relay race with their civilian collaborators and have since then denied the fruits of independence to the hapless and harried African peoples. In Africa, it appears as things change they remain the same owing to the villain and criminal manipulations of the ruling forces. African states including Nigeria have been very unfortunate, thoroughly rigged and ravished by the jackals.

It is with the forgoing background that we can understand the entry of Helon Habila into the narrative canvas of Nigeria, a country so misgoverned by its ruling forces that it has become a laughing stock within the comity of civilised nations. Habila belongs to the third generation phase of Nigerian writing. Touched by the directionlessness of the ship of the Nigerian state occasioned by its clueless but rapacious leadership, Habila has begun a narration of Nigeria with the publication of two full-length novels, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and *Measuring Time* (2006).

Edoro (2008) has tried to show the socio – historical context that threw up Habila as a writer. The Abacha dictatorship was at its worst, jailing, killing, bombing, stealing and labelling the critical society and its writers, including the budding ones and other democratic-minded Nigerians were part of Abacha's target for elimination. Nigeria was worse than a country in war as Abacha's terror and murderous machine shocked and awed Nigerians. The reverberations were also felt hugely within the international system. Wole Soyinka, one of those who narrowly escaped Abacha's Gulag, has recorded events of that period in his books, *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996) and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006). Ibrahim Babangida, who as Military President had dribbled

Nigerians from 1985 when he carried out a palace coup against the government of General Mohammed Buhari, refused to hand over power to Chief Moshood Abiola who had won the 1993 presidential election as the flag bearer of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). With the consistent and vigorous campaigns by Nigerians calling on the government to revalidate the cancelled elections and restore Abiola's mandate, Babangida was forced to step aside. But the latter had hurriedly put in place an interim government headed by Ernest Shonekan, a former Chief Executive Officer of the United African Company of Nigeria (UAC). This interim arrangement was kicked out three months later by Sanni Abacha, the thieving General who Babangida had kept in the wings.

Anyokwu (2008:45) has shown that Habila in his first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, like some of his compatriot contemporary writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), Sefi Atta (*Everything Good Will Come*), Chris Abani (*Graceland*), Teju Cole (*Everyday is for the Thief*), creates what we may term "faction". In *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila apparently gripped by a post-modernist creative consciousness, the reader encounters lived Nigerian history in its stark and crude realities: people and places we know in real life dominate the scenes and contours of narration. The events of the period in question are reproduced as historical and factual realities.

The story of the novel is told from the point of views of the narrator and Lomba. It is true that there are other very important characters in the novel, but through Lomba, a young journalist living in Lagos during the brutal regime of Sanni Abacha, the criminal activities of the regime are made manifest as they affect each of the characters. In spite of the episodic and almost disjointed narrative structure of the novel which starts from the end to the beginning, the story is about Lomba; Bola, a colleague and friend of Lomba whom he shared the same room with in their short-lived University education days; Alice, also an undergraduate student whose father is an Army General and who Lomba had a love relationship with, James, the redoubtable and nationalist-minded journalist and Joshua, the teacher-turned revolutionary who articulates the condition of the people and mobilizes them to change the decadent status quo. Other characters in the novel are Kela and his aunt, Auntie Rachael, (the owner of Goodwill Food Centre) where the people go to for feeding; Nancy, a wonderful assistant to Auntie Rachael; Brother, a driver – turned tailor; Janice, the prison superintendent's mistress who is a teacher by profession; Hagar, the student-turned prostitute who dies in the wake of the people's demonstration having been knocked down by a vehicle as she is running away from the rampaging goons who have come to attack and disperse the demonstrators. There are other characters in the novel who share the same burden and misfortune that they are confronted with. Most of these people live in the Poverty Street (formerly Morgan Street).

Lomba experiences all kinds of sufferings. He drops out of the University for according to him: "when school began to look like a prison, I had to get out" (*Waiting for an Angel*, 107) As a student, his University like others went through one closure after another. His closest friend and roommate Bola loses his parents and his two beloved sisters in an accident. As a result Bola becomes disoriented, preaching like a pastor within a section of their neighbourhood against military dictatorship. But he gets a raw deal in the hands of plain clothes security men who give him the beating of his life. By the time Lomba comes back two days after from Bola's house soldiers had already ransacked their hostels destroying everything in sight including his written works:

As I neared my block... my room was open, the door broken, hanging askew from the top hinge, half - blocking the entrance. And there were papers scattered all over the veranda and the steps... The room looked as if a battle had been fought in it: the mattresses were thrown on the floor; it was a poem, my poem. I picked up another; it was a page from one of my short stories...most of them was torn; covering the writing with thick, brown mud. I felt the imprint of the boots on my mind... (Waiting for an Angel, 71).

For two years Lomba is locked up in his tenement house trying to write a novel: "for my bread I taught English and literature an hour daily, minus Sundays, on a school certificate preparatory class run by a woman who always looked at me suspiciously, as if wondering what I did for a living" (*Waiting for an Angel*, 106). Everywhere to Lomba is a prison- his tenement house, the University that he has withdrawn from. And so, even before his imprisonment, his entire life is like that of a prisoner. In fact, other characters in the novel are affected by this claustrophobic environment as can be seen in the dingy tenement and the entire Poverty Street.

The heat in Poverty Street is such that everybody is gasping for breath. There are no trees in the streets. It is not only human beings that feel the negative impact of the heat. The entire environment is affected – dogs, chickens and other domestic animals. Poverty Street is one of the many decrepit, disease – ridden quarters that dot the entire setting of the novel which is of course Lagos, Nigeria. Apparently, because of the inhuman condition of the environment, Lomba only lived there for one year. Brother whose real name is Mohammed tells Kela: "Here na so so heat full everywhere. Heat and Soja. If the heat no kill you, soja go harass you" (*Waiting for an Angel*, 132).

The heat and complete aridity of the poverty street evoke the image of the setting of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where everything is portrayed as static, sterile, immovable and demobilised. The only tree in the setting is lifeless and the characters are stock to a place waiting for Godot who is nowhere in sight. The waiting game goes

on and on to eternity. But unlike the Beckettian world of perpetual immobility and total helplessness, concerned people like Mao (Ojikutu) who are dissatisfied with the state of things in the country begin to meet in Joshua's house to mobilise people for the revolution. The mobilisation becomes successful as can be seen in the demonstration at the Local Government Secretariat aimed at pointing government's attention to the plight of the people. Agreed, government through its coercive agents maims and kills some of the protesters declaring the ring leaders wanted, it is important to note that things cannot be the same again. The people's movement for change has begun and with time victory shall be theirs. The fact that the protest takes place and the people through the leadership of Joshua successfully change Morgan Street to Poverty Street indicates a huge way forward for the people.

At this point in our analysis, it is important to remember that as a student and even many years after he had dropped out of school, Lomba said he was not interested in politics. At every point that he was confronted on what he would like to be, he never wasted time by saying he wanted to be a writer. Even as a journalist he did not want to write on politics until James Fiki, his editor changed his mind. When asked by James if he could write on politics, Lomba's response was: "I am not political" (*Waiting for an Angel*, 108). But James quickly reacted: "in this country the very air we breathe is politics" (*Waiting for an Angel*, 108). In neo-colonial environments, politics is the decider of how things are shaped. Decisions and other outcomes of state policy are products of high-wired politics.

Later on after he has been arrested for covering the people's demonstration, it dawns on Lomba that our lives are suffused with politics. In the prison, given the effect of the imprisonment on his entire being, Lomba writes:

I write of my state in words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality. Here in prison loss of self is often expressed as anger (Waiting for an Angel, 3-4).

Here writing provides Lomba with an opportunity to let out the steam and reclaim his individuality which the prison and its condition have stifled.

The narrator (perhaps the alter ego of Habila?) allows Lomba a couple of times to give an account of his prison experience. By doing this, Lomba's grim encounter with a decrepit prison system is directly expressed and its impact on the reader is very palpable. Habila appears not to want a third party kind of reportage because it will not show the kind of visible impact that the sufferer himself (Lomba) wants to communicate. Lomba is from his own account dehumanized, depersonalized, tortured, disoriented and his soul destroyed. By keeping a diary where he narrates his sordid prison experience, Lomba is empowering himself with a surfeit of data for future analysis and power over his tormentor(s). According to Toolan, "narrators assert their authority to tell... To narrate is to make a bid for a kind of power" (*Toolan*: 1988:8).

This power is manifested in the prison superintendent's later attitude towards Lomba. The prison superintendent, who had earlier on seized Lomba's pencil and the sheet of papers he had written things on after much beating, subsequently comes to him covertly seeking knowledge. He realises the power of knowledge as contained in the written materials that he had ordered destroyed. It is a poignant irony but the reality of human situation that this same prison superintendent who had destroyed the things written by Lomba is now seen secretly currying the favour of the latter to teach him how to write:

He bent forward, and clapped a hand on my shoulder. I realized with wonder that the man, in his awkward, flat-footed way, was making overtures of friendship to me. My eyes fell on the boot that had stepped on my neck just five days ago (Waiting for an Angel, 16)

The importance of knowledge and the quest for it are two key issues in *Waiting for an Angel*. The prison superintendent seeks it from Lomba so that he can become humanized and therefore acceptable to his mistress-teacher, Janice. Kela is sent from Jos to join Auntie Rachael in search for knowledge. It should be remembered that he had failed his school certificate examination. In Auntie Rachael's place he becomes Joshua's student. Hagar, before her educational goals were scuttled was an undergraduate like Lomba and Bola. It is not surprising that having attained reasonable awareness about their condition and the hypocrisy of those running their lives, the people on one accord decide to have their fates in their own hands by demonstrating against all the injustices of the system. Armed with their new knowledge and in cahoots with intellectuals like Joshua and redoubtable editors with crusading zeal like James, the society cannot be the same again. The brutality of the system is not sufficient enough to detonate the revolutionary pressure that injustice and corruption have created in the first place.

In Habila's second novel, *Measuring Time*, the author continues with the narration of Nigeria's chequered history of great dreams deferred, signposted by the irresponsibility of the decadent class that has been running its affairs since independence. And as Anyokwu (2000:14) has correctly noted, *Measuring Time* "traces the historical tramlines of the fictional Keti community (and to some degree, Nigeria's history) from the mists of antiquity through pre-colonial and colonial times to the post-colonial era". In other words, Nigeria's dysfunctional history is masked in the fictional Keti community where all events of the novel take place. From

all the indicators, the Keti community is ruined by its leaders who do not consider the important place of the people in the general scheme of things.

Measuring Time is the story of Mamo and LaMamo, a set of twin brothers whose mother dies after giving birth to them. Their existence is compounded by an unconcerned father, who is more known for his philandering activities than any noble concern. Their father's name is Lammang who inherits wealth from his father-in-law after the latter's death. The twins are almost thirteen years when they first hear the story of their father's early love life and their mother's heartbreak. Auntie Marina, their father's sister, narrates to them the story of their father, the death of their mother and other issues concerning their family.

Because of the no-love-lost relationship between the twins and their father, they begin to dream to escape from their house to become child soldiers. Asabar, their cousin, joins them but Mamo's ill health does not allow him to complete the journey as LaMamo and Asabar leave for Timbuktu. Asabar returns after one month and two days saying that LaMamo has joined the rebel army in Chad.

Meanwhile, Mamo has been offered admission to study History. His father joins politics with the decision of the military to hand over power to civilians after many years on the saddle. Mamo drops out of the University owing to his ill health. Uncle Iliya (Asabar's father) offers him a teaching appointment at the Keti Community School with Uncle Iliya as the head of the school. Zara, whom Mamo and his twin brother LaMamo had fallen in love with in their much younger years, joins the teaching staff as a Mathematics teacher. Government in its policy inconsistencies shuts down the Keti Community School thereby rendering all the workers jobless. An attempt by the teachers' delegation led by Uncle Iliya to get the Mai of the Keti community to intervene so that the school could be reopened comes to nought making Uncle Iliya to say: 'Our traditional rulers are like politicians, you can't depend on their words' (*Measuring Time*, 125).

Through letter writing, LaMamo who is now in Monrovia keeps in touch with Mamo. In one of his letters, he regrets about the conflict in Liberia and war in general. He has even lost one of his eyes to the war. As LaMamo is moving from Liberia to Guinea fighting, his father Lamang is neck deep in the politics at home, changing from one party to another. Mamo busies himself with research activities leading to the publication of a review of Drinkwater's *A Brief History of the People of Keti* by the *History Society Quarterly*. Asabar becomes the leader of the Youth wing of Lamang's political party and wishes that LaMamo comes back to join politics for according to him, "the party needs people like him at this time". (*Measuring Time*, 154).

It is important to stress that Mamo's review of Drinkwater's book on the Keti people becomes his launch-pad into the politics of his community. He is invited by Robert Wanga, the leader of the Keti Youths' movement for a talk. The Waziri invites him to the palace. He is to replace the palace Secretary who has just died and he is also expected to write the personal history of the Mai and his ancestors which will be presented during the 10th anniversary of the Mai. But instead of allowing Mamo to do the work for which he has been employed, the cunning and corrupt waziri wants Mamo to interview him so that he will be included in the book. When Mamo, during the meeting of the Keti District Traditional Council, suggests that the people of the community be involved in the anniversary activities, the Waziri objects to it questioning: "What people?" (*Measuring Time*, 233). The Waziri is no doubt a wheeler dealer who is trying to use the book project to document himself with a view to becoming the Mai. He is very condescending of the people and will always engage in projects and programmes that are self-interested which have no bearing with the needs and aspirations of the people of Keti.

The fund-raising as suggested by Mamo is held with the governor in attendance. The governor appreciates the organisational abilities of Mamo. The money realised from the fund-raising ceremony is to be used for the construction of wells that will provide water for the people. Rumours are spreading like wide fire to the effect that the water engineers who have abandoned the site for the water well are said to have been hired by the Waziri and Mamo. When Mamo asks the Waziri about the work on the wells, the Waziri replies thus: "young man, you have done your part; the rest is in our hands" (*Measuring Time*, 250). From the way the Waziri carries on in the novel, it is clear that he is not a decent person. As the novel progresses, it dawns on Mamo that the Waziri is such a manipulative calculator who can do anything in pursuit of power. The clash between the Muslims and the Christians offers an opportunity to Mamo to know truly that the Waziri is evil. Many people are arrested in the wake of the crisis including Auntie Marina. To get the police to release Auntie Marina, the Waziri insists that Mamo must do his bidding: To write the biography of the Mai in which the Waziri will enjoy an important presence. Mamo is also expected to keep quiet on the millions of money realised during the fund-raising ceremony.

It is at this climactic point in the narration of the novel that the reader witnesses the arrival of LaMamo from the war front to the land of Keti brimming and bristling with revolutionary enthusiasm and concrete action. He warns his brother Mamo not to give into the Waziri's blackmail: "people like that must be opposed no matter what". (*Measuring Time*, 288). Under the revolutionary leadership of LaMamo the people chase away the colluding and corrupt water engineers, killing one of them in the process. The drilling site is pulled down and the pick-up vans of the construction company set on fire. The Waziri is killed for threatening the people with arrest and prosecution but the Mai is spared for rolling on the ground and begging the people. LaMamo is shot and later dies but before dying he has said thus to Mamo:

Promise me you'll send for Bintou when things are back to normal...I want my child to grow up here... beneath the hills, like we grew up....I know everything will be all right" (Measuring Time, 297).

LaMamo's wish that his wife Bintou be made to come back to Keti is obliged by Mamo as he writes a letter to Bintou asking her to return to Keti. With the struggle of the people against the fascist tendencies of the feudal state represented by the Mai and his agents (especially the Waziri) things cannot be the same again. A new Keti is bound to emerge where LaMamo's child and others will lead a life of happiness and fulfilment devoid of all the encrustations of the old order. Uncle Iliya is seen collecting signatures from the Keti people to be sent to the military governor urging him to reopen the Keti Community School. It is expected that this school will train a new set of leaders that will bring to bear the wishes of LaMamo so that his death cannot be in vain.

The struggle of the Keti people demonstrates sovereign will and power of the people over and above the state. A state which dehumanises its own citizens delegitimises itself and puts its own sovereignty in dire jeopardy. The involvement of the police and their brutal display leading to the killing of well-meaning citizens of Keti show the callousness of the police and lack of conflict resolution mechanism on the part of the Keti leadership. Habila tries to show in fictional terms the brutality of the Nigeria Police Force each time there is a misunderstanding amongst the people of the country. The police have become more of enemies than friends to the citizens.

As can be seen from the foregoing, Helon Habila, with the story of the Lammang's family, weaves a bigger tale of a nation that does not consider the interests and aspirations of its citizens. Lammang is, no doubt a wayward father who displays historical irresponsibility to members of his family. We are told that when Tabita his wife dies fifteen months after their wedding, Lammang is said to have: 'pushed open the door and walked out into the rain' (*Measuring Time*, 15). Three years after the birth of the twins, Lammang also shatters their illusion when he decides to take them away from Uncle Iliya's house. Were it not for Auntie Marina, the boys might have died very early in life, especially Mamo who is afflicted by sickle-cell anaemia. And so, the children's antipathy to their father can be easily understood. Lammang is busy running after widows, travelling here and there and playing worthless national politics at the expense of his family.

According to Sullivan (2001: 71), 'the nation...constitutes itself through the will and the imagination of the citizens of the state'. An irresponsible father like Lammang proves incapable of running a home. It is no wonder that he loses out within the national political arena. He is a failed father and also an incompetent state organiser. A nation, if left in the hands of unimaginative characters like Lammang is bound to atrophy. It is likely that Habila is warning Nigerians through the *Measuring Time* to be careful not to allow the like of Lammang to walk their way into the political arena because nation-building requires men and women of high imagination and inventiveness. In the novel, despite all his moves from one party to another and the employment and deployment of high level thuggery ably coordinated by Asabar his nephew, Lammang ends his life miserably. To build a successful nation, a combination of characters like Mamo for their intellectualism and the LaMamos of this world is an irreducible minimum because a nation requires an adroit combination of both intellectualism and robust action for its becoming.

In *Measuring Time* the place and role of Auntie Marina cannot be wished away. Beyond providing the novel with a rich feminine ambience, Auntie Marina's activities are extremely heroic and highly regarding. It is through her that the twins get to know a lot of things about themselves and their family and by extension the history of Keti. This also means that through Auntie Marina the twins and even the readers are taken into the heart of the malaise of Keti (contemporary Nigeria) with the story she tells of all that had happened in the past and their impact on the present. Auntie Marina reminds one of Nelly Dean, the old lady who retells the story of the events that had happened in the past regarding *Wuthering Heights* and Thruscross Grange in the Victorian novel titled *Wuthering Heights*. Auntie Marina is the people's griot who is unfortunately killed by the police in their raid against the people over their religious misunderstanding.

Again, one is tempted to think that even though Auntie Marina is a woman, she appears to represent Christopher Okigbo who is arguably one of Africa's greatest writers. Okigbo's life was cut short during a senseless war between Nigeria and Biafra. Perhaps the war might have been stopped but for lack of conflict-resolution strategies by the leadership of the Nigerian state. Gowon's police action response to the challenge of the state of Biafra was not able to weaken the resolve of the Biafran people and the war was fought for three years before the no victor- no winner declaration in January 1970 by the federal republic of Nigeria.

Habila presents us with a society that wastes its best: Tabita dies fifteen months after her marriage; Uncle Haruna who had fought in the Nigeria/Biafra war commits suicide; Lammang and the Waziri (though the two most despicable characters in the novel) die as a result of their disreputable and ignoble activities – Lammang for rigging election and the Waziri for daring the people; Asabar dies for recklessness; Auntie Marina is killed by the rampaging police and LaMamo the revolutionary killed by the repressive forces of the state. It is true that at the end of the novel, Zara and Mamo have not died but from all indications they have become negated. Zara has not been successful in her marriages and the teaching job that would have given her succour is taken away from her with the closure of the Keti Community School by the government. The setting of the novel is filled with ambitions that are not realised. All the genuine efforts of the people to enjoy a life of happiness and fulfilment

become impossible because of the way the leadership of the community organises the society. There is no sincerity of purpose on the part of the leadership of the Kati community. Even if the Mai were to run an efficient and responsible administration, characters like the Waziri would not have allowed him the opportunity to do so.

One is not surprised with the level of negativities that buffet the *Measuring Time*. After all, the novel was set at a time the military overlords in Nigeria were at the helm of affairs. In fact, a character in the novel known as Major Hamza is the administrator of the Local Government. He is Zara's former husband and is in the habit of organising parties every now and then. The narrator captures it thus: 'There were more parties, mostly at the same venue, mostly with the same people, and mostly for the same reasons: birthdays for girlfriends' (*Measuring Time*, 250). This character reminds us of Major Hamza el Mustatpha who has recently been sentenced to death for his involvement in the killing of Kudirat Abiola, the wife of Moshood Abiola who was brutally murdered by the Abacha goons under the supervision and control of el Mustapha. The governor is also a military officer. A warm relationship existed between military officers and the traditional institution during the military era in Nigeria. After the criminal annulment of the 1993 election, many traditional rulers were falling over one another to support the annulment. It is within that context that we can understand the relationship between the Mai and the entire palace of the Keti kingdom with the government of the day. Both the military and the traditional institution work against the interest of the people.

In all, it is meet to state that *Measuring Time* is a novel that reflects or mirrors the unique characterised experience of the nation – a nation rigged by its leaders. The Keti community (Nigeria) from all indications is racked by poverty and deepening economic inequality and misery. It is a roiling enclave of poverty and immiseration. The community is deeply divided along class lines - the Mais, the Waziris and their political friends and collaborators ranged against the poor in the Keti community.

The political forces are busy rigging elections and manipulating all the political processes to the disadvantage of the poor and hapless members of the community. In frustration, the youths join the political fray as thugs, killers, and election riggers. Asabar's disorientation and perpetual drunkenness should be seen in this context. For lack of direction, he attempts to join the army with Mamo and LaMamo his cousins as mercenaries. He fails in this endeavour only to return to Keti to become a dare-devil thug-in-chief and leader of the youth wing of a party that is in every material particular corrupt and unresponsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the people of Keti.

The return of LaMamo within the canvas of Habila's narratology is, as Anyokwu (2008) has correctly noted, a simplistic over-dramatisation of the concept of *Deus ex machina*. However, it should be noted that the sudden return of LaMamo from the pursuit of his war exploits/efforts quickens the revolutionary tempo of the novel. LaMamo's practical revolutionary leadership is so engaging and salutary that the devilish and corrupt Waziri is made to get his comeuppance and the Great Mai made to eat the humble pie by his cowardly and beggarly response to the people's raging ire after they have wasted the wily Waziri. It is not 'a mindless orgy of violence' as Anyokwu (2008:6) has asserted. If anything, it is a revolutionary violence with its regenerative implications.

LaMamo makes the ennobling and deeply humanising self-sacrifice in defence of the people who have suffered all kinds of exploitations in the hands of the corrupt leadership of the Keti community. Like the aborted well project, the leadership and its collaborators are always in the habit of hijacking the projects and resources meant for the advancement of the lives of the people for their own selfish ends.

In *Waiting for an Angel* the outcome of the people's resistance is uncertain as the revolutionaries are scattered by the state forces. In *Measuring Time* the people's movement to free themselves from the stranglehold of their exploiters is also vitiated but the Keti community cannot be the same again.

There is no doubt that Habila is concerned with the condition of the masses and the manipulation by the forces that be. The revolutionary imperative appears to be the *leit motif* of his novelistic tradition but sadly his creative consciousness allows the revolutionary stirrings not to see the light of the day. The reading community desires and deserves a sustained and sustainable revolutionary artistic order.

Habila's two novels provide proof to Josaphet's (1990:5) view that 'literary texts are interwoven with historical phenomena'. According to Kumer (1969:195) Henry James is said to have confidently proclaimed that the act of the novel depended essentially upon exact realism, with the corollary that the author's personal views and feelings ought to remain invisible. This is not so with Habila. His narration is visibly and clearly about Nigeria with its excess baggage of stifling contradictions. These two novels like some before them, by other Nigerian writers formalise the search for nationhood and demonstrate that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power. There are real historical dates, historical names and events especially in *Waiting for an Angel*.

Reading Habila's two novels, it is tempting to suggest that his creative consciousness is animated and powered hugely by the Frankfurt School.

REFERENCES

- Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. New York: Picador, 2006
Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: HEB, 1975
Adichie, Chimamanda. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Lagos: Farafina, 2006

- Anyokwu, Christopher. 'Inheritance of Loss: Narrative and History in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*'. *California Linguistic Notes*. Vol. xxxiii, No. 2. (Spring 2008), pp. 1-27
- Attah, Sefi. *Everything Good Will Come*. Lagos: Farafina, 2006
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 1978
- Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Harmondworth: Penguin Books, (first published 1847) 1975
- Cole, Teju. *Every Day is for the Thief*. Lagos: Cassava Republic Press, 2007
- Edoro, A. 'Waiting for an Angel: Refashioning the African Writing Self'. An unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Kansas, 2008
- Habila, Helon. *Waiting for an Angel*. London: Penguin Books, 2003
- _____. *Measuring Time*. Lagos: Cassava Republic Press, 2007
- Kumer, Shivk. Ed. *British Victorian Literature. Recent Revaluations*. New York: New York University Press, 1969
- Josaphat, B. Kubayanda, 'Dictatorship, Oppression and New Realism'. *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 21, No. 21. (Summer, 1990), pp. 5-11
- Marlow, James E. *Charles Dickens: The Use of Time*. Cranbury, NJ, London, Mississauga, Ont: Associated University Press, 1994
- Toolan, Micheal J. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988
- Soyinka, Wole. *Open Sore of a Continent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996
- _____. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. Ibadan and Oxfordshire: Book craft and Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2006
- Sullivan, Joanna. 'The Question of a National Literature for Nigeria'. *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 32. No. 3. (Autumn, 2000) pp. 71-85